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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000714

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR D, INR/R/MR, I/RW, I/REC; PA
SA/INS(FOR JWALLER); SA/PD (FOR LJIRWIN, LSCENSNY,
WREINCKENS); SSA/PAB

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PTER](#) [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [OIIP](#) [CE](#) [EGEN](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: MEDIA PLAY - AMBASSADOR WILLS' 4/24 REUTERS

INTERVIEW ABOUT LTTE SUSPENSION OF TALKS

¶11. On April 21, the LTTE announced it was suspending peace talks. In a letter to the GSL, the LTTE listed its reasons for suspending talks as: its exclusion from the 4/14 Washington Conference, problems with the ceasefire accord implementation, and that GSL had not focused enough on rebuilding the economy of the North and East. On April 24, Reuters ran an exclusive interview with Ambassador Wills focusing on USG reaction to this letter. The full text of the interview was later released to the press (Reftel Colombo 0707). In addition to Reuters and Agence France-Presse, nearly all major English, Tamil and Sinhala dailies carried the story, some with the full text of the interview. Major television and radio stations did the same. There were no editorials. Given the extensive attention from the dailies, we expect less weekend paper news coverage.

Television and Radio.

¶12. In their 4/24 newscasts, independent and government-owned Sri Lankan telecasters (MTV, SLRC, ITN, Swarnavahini and TNL) and radio stations carried the Ambassador's interview as a headline story. Ambassador Wills also spoke with BBC World's television program Asia Today.

Newspapers.

¶13. The Ambassador's comments were headlined by all major English, Sinhala, and Tamil dailies. The independent English daily, the MIRROR ran the headline "Get back to talks - US tells Tigers" with the full text of the interview on the second page. Government-owned English DAILY NEWS ran "U.S., France urge return to peace table" below the fold, and mentioned France only briefly. Both the MIRROR and DAILY NEWS articles highlighted the US desire for the Tigers to return to negotiations, negative Tiger behaviors, development assistance, and the need for the LTTE to give up terrorism to gain international recognition. Opposition English daily, the ISLAND led with, "LTTE should return to negotiating table - Ashley Wills." They covered the same topics, (but selected excerpts somewhat more critical of the LTTE), and included the full text.

4/24 Tamil headlines were similar. Independent Tamil daily, Virakesari reports: "US request Tigers to attend talks" continuing "...if the Liberation Tigers wish to represent the Tamil people in fulfilling their aspirations, they cannot pull out but should participate at the peace talks" and significant excerpts of the text. Under the headline, "Tigers should not pull out from talks; Must attend Tokyo Conference" - requests US," Independent Tamil daily, Thinakkural noted "Today, world's attention on Sri Lanka is more than ever before. The international community will be watching closely to see that no one's rights get abused systemically once a final settlement is found. If Tigers wish to be respected, they should accept the true situation and work together with the government to build a new Sri Lanka. Tigers should not pull out from talks with the government. They also should attend the Tokyo Aid Conference, said the US Ambassador for Sri Lanka Ashley Wills." State owned Tamil daily, Thinakaran's headline article, "US informs Tigers to resume talks" continued with "US requests Tamil militants to attend talks as that is the only way to wipe out the sufferings of Tamil people. LTTE has informed that it is temporarily pulling out of peace talks showing that nothing has been done to uplift the standard of living of the Tamil people in the north and East and for not being invited to the Washington Meeting... If LTTE wishes to safeguard the welfare of the Tamil people, they should not pull out but attend the peace talks, said US Ambassador Ashley Wills....Further he said, that the government and the LTTE should honor the conditions in the ceasefire agreement during the time of the suspension of talks."

Headlines in the Sinhala dailies were more slanted against the LTTE. Government-owned Sinhala daily DINAMINA led with "Return to negotiation table; announcement of withdrawal from Japan talks is a great mistake - America tells LTTE," and reported "America has pointed out to LTTE that it has done a big mistake with this announcement..Facts like assassination of opponents, child soldier issues, ransom etc do not help build any confidence on the LTTE.LTTE had earlier stated that exclusion from Washington talks, no progress in the north development process etc, paved way to their decision of withdrawal..But Mr. Ashley Wills stated that the exclusion was because of US's seeing them as terrorists .." Independent Sinhala daily LANKADEEPA led with, "America rejects tiger reasoning" and reported "If they genuinely represent Tamils they should not have flee from the negotiations table... Did not LTTE engage in violations of MOU, ransoms, child soldier recruitment? American Ambassador requests to return to peace talks.." Independent Sinhala daily DIVAINA ran, "If LTTE respects Tamil people's rights, they should have not withdrawn from peace talks" - US Ambassador Ashley Wills," and continued "If they are genuine on Tamil people's interests, they should attend peace talks... Blame should not be only on SLG... Solution only through negotiations... Devolution of power a possible solution... Sri Lanka should be one country... All ethnicities rights can be protected only through a democratic system... Tiger objective should be achieving peace as quickly as possible... Their acts delay this... delay the day of Tamil communities living in a peaceful environment... They have already missed several opportunities..."

International coverage began with the exclusive granted to Reuters (4/23) , "U.S. urges Tamil Tigers to return to peace table." Agence France-Presse (4/24) also carried excerpts from the interview under the headline "US slams Tigers over pull out from Sri Lanka talks," and began with "The United States Thursday slammed Tamil Tiger guerrillas for suspending peace talks with the Colombo government and warned the rebels they must renounce "terrorism" and resume negotiations." The Hindu of India (4/24) states, "LTTE pursuing violent, separatist agenda: U.S."

Wills